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BOOK REVIEW

The Past is Never Dead; It's Not Even Past

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Today's medical students and neurologists all too often overlook the historical basis of modern neurology. However, a good understanding concerning those upon whose shoulders we stand, helps us gain a broad perspective of any discipline. The chronicle of how our knowledge of brain function has developed is both fascinating and essential for any scholarly approach to neuroscience. This volume does an excellent job of elucidating the ancient components of this saga by describing the first steps in developing our understanding of brain function by ancient Greeks. In a series of essays, Professor Thomas Walshe traces the formation of increasingly accurate concepts from a range of speculations. Each chapter is focused on a specific aspect of Greek thinking about sensory and motor function, but the text flows logically from one topic to another. A period of over 1000 years is covered, beginning with Homeric references to brain injuries, going through Hippocrates and Alcmaeon and the identification of the brain as the seat of consciousness, culminating with Erasistratus and the recognition that peripheral nerves grow out from the brain and that the folded nature of the brain in man reflects its superior function. The quotations from ancient text throughout this work help to make it both thoroughly enjoyable and eminently readable. I would have liked to see a little more detail on the convergence of Egyptian and Greek reasoning concerning nervous function, but overall the book is well-centered and has a clear trajectory. Finally, the volume makes a transition to the present era by a discussion of the Hippocratic Oath and the current relation between doctor and patient. This ties the book together and accentuates the topic's relevance to today's doctors. While this is a work of serious scholarship, the text of the study is very accessible and easy to read. The volume is not merely recommended for neurologists but for anyone interested in the evolution of modern medicine or in the ideas of the ancient Greeks who contributed so much to the thought of today.

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